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ABSTRACT

The Draft of the Second Chinese Character Simplification Scheme proposed by the Chinese Committee on Language Reform, published in 1977, is discussed. The political history of the draft and current uncertainty about character simplification are examined, and a rigorous methodology for determining the success rate of a script reform is proposed. This evaluation procedure would take into account three factors: the popularity, stability, and degree of change made. Popularity would be determined by a survey of the literate in all walks of life across China. The stability ratio would be determined by comparing: (1) the stability duration (the interval between the current date and date of last standardization); and (2) a stability constant (twice the number of years required to complete a secondary education). The change factor is the ratio of modified scripts to the total number of common characters. (MSE)

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CONTRADICTIONS IN CHINESE LANGUAGE REFORM

BY CHIN-CHUAN CHENG

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LANGUAGE LEARNING LABORATORY
School of Humanities
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CONTRADICTIONS IN CHINESE LANGUAGE REFORM

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ABSTRACT

The Draft of the Second Chinese Character Simplification Scheme proposed by the Chinese Committee on Language Reform was published in 1977. The precursors of the Draft as signed articles had often presented political reasoning of the then political movements as linguistic argumentation for character simplification. As the political atmosphere changed in the last years of the 1970's, the earlier political obsession engendered certain negative feelings toward the Draft. The negative views consequently led to the avoidance of discussion on the Draft in publications. Another negative factor against this reform was the desire for stability in reaction to the constant change which was the theme of the Cultural Revolution and which created much social turmoil. At present, Chinese publications are menacingly silent about the Draft due to the uncertainty of the entire process of character simplification. In light of these events, it is suggested in this writing that the standardization process incorporate a rigorous methodology for determining the success rate of a script reform. To arrive at a success rate, one asks the following questions: (1) How popular is the proposed reform? (2) How stable is the writing system? When was the script last changed and how much will the proposal disrupt the learning and educational process? (3) How much of the writing system is modified? The proposed evaluation procedure takes into consideration the popularity, stability, and change factors. The popularity factor is determined by a sampling of the literate in all walks of life across the nation. On the basis of such a sampling, one can determine the popularity ratio by comparing the number of sampled individuals who accept the entire set of proposed characters to the total number of sampled individuals. The stability ratio is determined by comparing the stability duration to a stability constant. The stability duration is the interval between the current date and the date of last standardization. The stability constant is proposed to be two times the number of years to complete a secondary education. The change factor is the ratio of modified scripts to the total number of common characters. The stability factor applies only when the stability duration is shorter than the stability constant. The product of popularity, stability, and modification ratios is considered the success rate. It is hope that this conception of success rate will provide a more tangible index for evaluating a proposed script reform.

1. Draft of the Second Character Simplification Scheme

It is well known that languages change as they are used, but they also remain quite stable. Change and stability are conflicting forces, but they interact to keep language alive and at the same time maintain an equilibrium so that communication is not rendered impossible. Due to the same interaction of these forces, the Chinese writing system continually changes as new characters are introduced for semantic distinction and complex ones simplified for ease of use. In China at the turn of this century, script simplification became a much stronger force because of a political focus on the education of the populace as a democratization process. The "vulgar", simpler variant, characters of the low culture of the traditional Chinese plays and fiction printed since the tenth century were seriously studied by scholars (Liu and Li 1930). In the early 1950's, the ideology that considered the masses as the motive forces of history dictated that the "vulgar" characters be officially recognized. The draft of the first Chinese Character Simplification Scheme was compiled in 1954 and distributed for discussion in 1955. In 1956 the Scheme was finalized and officially promulgated by the State Council of the People's Republic of China. During the formative years of this Scheme, people from all walks of life participated in shaping its final version.

In handwriting, the script continued to evolve in the direction of simplification. The Committee on Language Reform collected additional simplified characters in circulation during the 1960's and the early 1970's. In order to give due recognition to these newly created characters, it announced the Draft of the Second Simplification Scheme for comments in December 1977. This Draft contained 853 simplified characters and 61 simplified character components. Many writings about this Draft were published. For a while, it seemed that the announcement was a most timely event. But since 1979, only a year after the announcement, one hardly finds any news items or articles about the Draft. In my view, this silence is entirely contrary to the work style of the Committee of Language Reform during the 1950's. Before this period, Chinese intellectuals and linguistic scholars had always written about and contributed to the work of language reform. I will discuss these contradictions and attempt to propose a way to evaluate the success rate of language planning.

In the year after the announcement of the Draft of the Second Scheme, the Language Reform page of the *Guangming Ribao (Guangming Daily)* carried a great deal of articles on both general and specific aspects of the Draft. As a matter of fact, even before the announcement, signed articles had already discussed the newly simplified characters. The biweekly Language Reform page of the *Guangming Daily* appeared as early as the 1950's. During the Cultural Revolution it disappeared for a few years and then reappeared in 1973. The writings published in the 1970's often showed a heavy political tone. This was the period of "zhengzhi guashuai", politics in command. The commanding politics was even visible in the titles. The following are some samples of these titles taken from the *Guangming Daily*:

Kong Laoer shi fandui hanzi biange de zushiye (Confucius was the great master of those who opposed Chinese character reform) (February 25, 1974).

Shenru pi Lin pi Kong tuidong hanzi gaige (Going in depth with criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius, pushing ahead Chinese character reform) (April 10, 1974).

Pipan "keji fuli", gaige hanzi (Criticizing "restraining oneself in order to restore old rites" to reform Chinese characters) (April 25, 1974).

Pipan Kong Meng zhi dao cujin wenzi gaige (Criticizing the way of Confucius and Mencius to promote script reform) (May 25, 1974).

Gong nong bing shi wenzi gaige de zhulijun (Workers, peasant, and soldiers are the main forces in script reform) (September 10, 1974).

"Jiang wenzi jiaogei dazhong" shi gonggu wuchan jieji zhuanzheng de xuyao ("Give the writing script to the masses" is a must in consolidating the proletariat dictatorship) (July 25, 1975).

Such "politics in command" proved detrimental to the academic pursuit in this area. Most of the scholarly journals disappeared in the late 1960's and did not resurface until ten years later. Hence it was hard to find academic work which was free from the imposition of such political coloring. However, according to the *Guangming Daily* April 7, 1978, in the first four months after the announcement of the Draft, over 10,000 letters were received by the Committee on Language Reform. Of these, 8,348 were received in the first month. From the articles published in 1977 and 1978, we see that both positive and negative views of the Draft existed. I have discussed these views in an earlier publication (Cheng 1979). The pros and cons are reiterated below:

Pros:

a. The simplified characters in circulation were now officially recognized; the announcement was a timely recognition of the language realities.
b. As the newly simplified characters contained fewer writing strokes, they were easier to learn.
c. Homophone substitution of simpler characters as incorporated in this Draft eliminated some problems of unnecessary differentiation of characters and hence was a step forward in the direction of phoneticization of the writing system.

Cons:

a. Since some characters, especially those in the second list of the Draft, were used only in certain geographical areas and professions, they were unknown to many people.
b. Because of reduction of writing strokes, some distinct characters became similar in shape, and thus confusion could easily occur.

c. Homophone substitution could and did result in ambiguity of interpretation.

The year 1979 was ideally the time for debate on the proposed reform. However, publications chose to remain silent on this issue. In a cursory count, I found more than 300 articles published in *Zhongguo Yuwen (Chinese Language), Yuwen Zhishi (Language Knowledge), Guangming Daily, Yuwen Xuexi (Language Learning), and Wenzi Gaige (Language Reform)* in 1955-57. In contrast, publications in this area were very few in number in 1978 and in the ensuing two years. The standard reference journal *Zhongguo Yuwen* gave very little space to these topics. One might think that this journal was not devoted to such issues and that other publications would take up these matters. However, to the best of my knowledge, no such other publications existed. One usually searches the *Guangming Daily* for such articles. Ironically, at the time one expected to see great debates on the Draft, the *Guangming Daily* eliminated the Language Reform page entirely in 1979.

In my view, the silence was to a large extent a reaction to the obsession of the political parroting of the previous years. In the first issue of the *Zhongguo Yuwen* in 1980, the first article was entitled "Yuyan yanjiu dayou kewei" (There is much one can do in linguistic research). This was a signed article and the author was given as Pinglunyuan (Commentator) of the journal. This Commentator listed the areas that urgently needed to be studied. These areas were language acquisition, language teaching at the elementary school level, teaching Chinese to minority nationalities, lexicography and lexicology, sociolinguistics, language and communication, interaction between phonology and syntax, and dialectology. The only mentioning that was remotely related to language planning was a brief statement that the teaching of Putonghua (Standard language) should not be separated from language teaching. In the article, advances in linguistics outside China were alluded to a couple of times. Achievements of language planning in China in the past and the impending uncertainty of the proposed Second Scheme were not at all mentioned.

With such a silence, the Draft of the Second Scheme was therefore not as successful as the Draft of the Scheme of 1955 in gaining popular support. Besides the negative views listed above, another reason for the lack of support was the feeling against the constant change which was the theme of the Cultural Revolution a few years ago. This sentiment was clearly shown in Zhou Youguang (1978). The Committee on Language Reform remained in silence for a while. Two years after the publication of the Draft, it printed a questionnaire for a Revised Draft for distribution in August 1981. The Revised Draft reduced the number of proposed simplified characters to 111. It is not clear to me how the questionnaire was distributed and what the rate of return was. I was honored with the privilege of receiving a copy of the questionnaire. But I have not yet seen published information or discussion on the Revised Draft. The silence is due to some uncertainty of the entire process of character simplification. The question then is how can a language planning agency determine at a certain time if it is appropriate to officially

recognize the simplified characters in current circulation. The standard answer one hears in China is "diaocha yanjiu" (survey and research). Beyond this general requirement, there is little discussion on methodological rigor. Such an answer is therefore rather illusory. My proposal is that the standardization process should incorporate a rigorous methodology for determining the success rate of a script reform. In the following I will present an approach for determining such a success rate.

2. Success Rate of Script Reform

In determining how successful a proposed script reform is, one needs to know if the concerned characters are in wide circulation. In order to determine how wide the circulation is, one needs to survey the population. If all the sampled individuals accept the entire set of proposed characters, then it is very likely that the standardization will succeed. On the other hand if the ratio of those who know and are willing to use the entire set of proposed characters to the total number of individuals sampled is low, then it is obvious that the standardization will not be readily accepted by the populace. We will call this factor the popularity ratio. This is all very intuitive. But what categories of people should be included and what is the geographic distribution of these individuals in the sampling?

In the articles published after the announcement of the Draft of the Second Scheme we see clearly that many of the proposed characters are used only in certain geographic areas or in certain professions. It is only wise for a standardization not to impose such a currency in local areas or narrow sectors of professions on the entire population. Therefore it is essential that the sampling covers literate people in all walks of life across the entire country. According to the communique of the State Statistical Bureau of the People's Republic of China on the Third Census results, the percentage of illiterates and semi-literates in the total population was 23.5 in 1982. The requirement of sampling only the literate is not difficult to implement. Is it feasible for the Committee on Language Reform to do such a sampling? I believe it is. Such a job is fairly mechanical. But the results are crucial for decision making.

However, the outcome of such a sampling may not be taken directly as the success rate of implementation of a forthcoming language reform. As discussed earlier, the equilibrium between change and stability has to be seriously considered. It is obvious that a policy which dictates modification of the writing system every year will generate fatal confusions. Even a ten-year interval is too short for stability. My reasoning is as follows. In modern times, it takes 10 to 12 years to complete the compulsory secondary education. One expects to be able to utilize in adulthood what is learned during these formative years. It would be disconcerting to find that what was learned a few years ago has to be relearned; one should be able to apply what is learned for a duration longer than the time needed to learn it. I therefore think that the least time needed for stability should be two times the number of years for completing the secondary education. We can call this time

length, 20 to 24 years, the stability constant. The interval between the last script reform and the date of current proposed reform is the stability duration. If the stability duration is longer than the stability constant, then the reform is more likely to succeed.

Another factor has to be considered in measuring the success rate. This factor is the ratio of the number of characters to be modified to the total number of common characters. Intuitively, we feel that the situation is rather chaotic if half of the common characters have to be changed to some new forms. If the number of modified characters is small in the total inventory, then the effect of relearning and the difference between earlier printings and new publications can be rather minor. On the other hand, a large amount of change can be very involved in both education and printing. This ratio is in an inverse relationship with the confusion of change. This ratio of change in the inventory therefore should be incorporated in determining the success rate.

Three factors have been considered in judging the likely success of a reform initiative. These three factors interact upon each other. A committee in charge of possible reform would have to weight these factors against each other, assuming that higher ratios of popularity and stability and a lower ratio of change increase the probability of success of the considered reform.

When the Draft was announced in 1977, there was no sampling done. This is why the Committee on Language Reform could not produce any firm response to the accusation that many newly simplified characters were totally unknown. As to the calculation of stability duration, it is somewhat complicated by the fact that although the last official simplification was announced in 1956, it was not fully implemented until 1964 when the master list of 2,238 simplified characters was published. The stability duration, therefore, could be regarded as 13 years, from 1964 to 1977. The stability constant is 20 or 24, two times the number of years to complete middle school education. The change ratio can be estimated by using 6,196 as the total number of common characters. This was the number of characters in the standard font jointly published by the Department of Culture and the Committee on Language Reform for printing houses in 1964. With regard to the 853 characters in the Draft of the Second Scheme, the popularity is low, as mentioned earlier, the stability of the previous script reform is short, and the change ratio, 853 out of 6,196 or more than 13%, is rather high. These ratios point to low probability of success.

In contrast, the success rate of the 111 characters given in the Revised Draft should be higher because of the smaller amount of characters involved. As I see it, the Revised Draft does not reach an optimal point either. The main reason is the short duration between the last official simplification and this new announcement. The shortness of the stability duration is psychologically crucial as discussed above. Moreover, as the populace had just undergone a series of abrupt political and social changes in the Cultural Revolution during the 10 years between 1966 and 1976, another

major change in the writing system immediately after these turbulent years was largely felt to be a disconcerting event. This is at least what I read in Zhou Youguang (1978). On the other hand, if the announcement of the final version of the scheme based on the Revised Draft containing 111 characters is postponed until 1988, 24 years since the last reform in 1964, the stability factor will be much more favorable. I therefore think that official promulgation of the final form of the Second Scheme can be delayed for a few years.

3. Outreach Programs

The Committee on Language Reform, however, may not want to stay dormant between now and 1988. It may wish to take this opportunity to rebuild its expertise and establish outreach programs. Considering the excellent jobs it did during the 1950's, I would rank the Committee one of the most successful language planning agencies in the world. Over the past decade, however, the composition of the Committee became somewhat mysterious largely due to its reorganization during the Cultural Revolution. It is now time to announce to the country and to the whole world the membership of the Committee.

The types of outreach programs that I have in mind do not go beyond the scope of what Premier Zhou Enlai defined in 1958. Xu Baohua and Yan Yiming (1978) have also listed a few tasks for the work of language standardization. I will look at only a couple of problems from the perspective of international communication. As I see it, in the past few years there have occurred and recurred phenomena that are inconsistent with the purposes of the Committee. These matters have to do with the use of complex characters in place of officially simplified ones in formal printing and with the confusion of how to spell personal and place names in Pinyin. Tian Jin and Gong Shangwen (1976) have correctly pointed out that the use of displaced complex characters and the misspellings in Pinyin in the commercial area are violations of the language standardization. Recently, such happenings seemed to have some sort of official sanction. In my opinion, such deviations indeed work against the standardization that the Committee has strived to establish.

I will single out the journal *Zhongguo Jianshe (China Reconstructs)* for discussion. In terms of language, this journal is often riddled with contradictions. As it is well known, the Pinyin system was officially adopted in 1958. But not until 1979 did the English edition of the journal change the spellings of Chinese place and personal names from the Wade-Giles system to Pinyin. Before 1979, it carried a lesson in each issue to teach the Chinese language to the foreign reader. In the lesson everything was spelled in Pinyin. But in the main text, Chinese names were stubbornly given in Wade-Giles. Such persistent use of Wade-Giles had its repercussions. As the journal was often read by Chinese students who were learning English, many Chinese students and scholars who came to the States cannot spell their own names properly. They often added a hyphen between the syllables of their first names to simulate the Wade-Giles convention even

though their passports do not show their names with such a separating character. I also know of someone who changed his official name in Pinyin to approximate the Wade-Giles system for the city telephone listing. Since Pinyin has been accepted by influential agencies such as the United Nations, the U.S. Board on Geographical Names, and the International Standard Organization, such nonstandard use of Pinyin by Chinese scholars may have far-reaching implications. If the irregular spellings are construed as the standard, then confusion will result. Now that China is looking outward, international communications occur frequently. It is crucial at this time to set the standard straight. The pamphlets *Zhongguo Renming Diming Hanyu Pinyin Pinxiefa (Pinyin Orthography of Chinese Personal and Place Names)* published in 1975 and *Zhongguo Renming Diming Pinxie Guifanhua Wenti (Problems of Standardization of Orthography of Chinese Personal and Place Names)* published in 1976 can be followed up with a major policy decision to set the orthography, at least for personal and place names. More importantly, Chinese scholars may find it rewarding to learn seriously the Pinyin system. The Committee on Language Reform is naturally the agency to assume the responsibility of popularization of Pinyin. Pinyin is usually taught in primary school. At the college level, people do not seem to care very much about it. Emphasis on college students' learning it may provide an incentive or atmosphere for middle school students to continue to maintain their competence acquired during their early years of education. According to the *Guangming Daily* May 19, 1978, the Central People's Broadcasting Station in Beijing and the Committee on Language Reform jointly sponsored rounds of broadcast of lectures on Pinyin in 1974, 1975, and 1978. In Shanghai, the Bureau of Education and the Shanghai Broadcasting Station also sponsored a series of lecturers from March through May 1977 (*Guangming Daily* June 17, 1978). It seems to me that another round of broadcast with the aim of reaching adults can be of help to the standardization.

Now we return to *China Reconstructs*. A couple of years ago, the publisher started to issue a Chinese edition of the journal. In this Chinese edition the displaced complex characters are used, regressing to the pre-standardization stage of 30 years ago and thus in a sense undermining the work of the Committee on Language Reform. The publisher perhaps will quickly retort that the use of complex characters is to facilitate the overseas Chinese who are not familiar with the simplified characters. If that is the motive, then the intention is indeed very noble. But since the journal is so good at and so proud of reporting constructions and reconstructions in China, any serious reader will question the wisdom of not showing the work of language modernization and standardization which has involved millions of people in the process. Even if indeed the publisher wishes to facilitate those who are not familiar with the simplified characters, a different format such as the provision of corresponding complex characters in some convenient places in the texts can be done. As far as I know, this has not been attempted.

Another example of such deviations by the publisher of *China Reconstructs* can be found in the printing of books for the youth of Chinese descent in foreign countries. In recent years, these youths went to China to study the Chinese language and to tour the

country. The language lessons were normally printed in the simplified characters by some other publishing houses. However, the publisher of *China Reconstructs* reverted the language work and issued publications in complex characters for them. The Chinese-English bilingual book *Finding Family Roots* is an example of such anomaly. If the publisher thinks that everyone outside China stubbornly uses complex characters, then we should point out that simplified characters are normally taught in the Chinese classes in the United States and in many other countries.

What is the Committee on Language Reform to do about deviations from the standard such as those discussed with the journal *China Reconstructs*? This question is related to what I call the outreach programs. The Committee as was conceived many years ago was a policy-making agency. Its members were distinguished scholars who were primarily associated with universities or other academic units. There were also others who did more routine work. In the past decade, the Committee did not seem to be as visible as they had been in the middle 1950's. Many of us who are interested in language planning had at one time or other difficulty seeking out someone on the Committee for discussion. I will venture to offer the following thoughts for de-mystification of the Committee in the future. The Committee may find it most useful for implementing its policies if it can provide easy access by others for consultation on language work, including street signs, spellings of brand names, correct forms of characters, Chinese language outside China, etc. In other words, a service branch besides the policy unit can strengthen the work of the Committee. Individuals, publishers, printers, schools, and other organizations should appreciate the convenient services the Committee provides.

To summarize, the relatively long period of silence of the language planning activities in China since 1979 has prompted this study of rate of success for implementation of character simplification. I have touched upon the areas of popularity, stability, and change. It is hoped that this discussion will help solve some of the contradictions mentioned or alluded to in this writing.

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